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JOHN INNES

PAINTER OF THE CANADIAN WEST





John Innes

Painter of the Canadian West





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John James

John Innes

Painter of the Canadian West

By JOHN BRUCE COWAN



VANCOUVER
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First Edition

John Innes

Painter of the Canadian West

ON January 13th, 1941, at the age of 77, there died in Vancouver, British Columbia, a man whose career was more than ordinarily adventurous and colorful, John Innes, justly called "The Painter of the Canadian West." Painter, journalist, illustrator, cartoonist, war correspondent, soldier, rancher, poet, engineer, inventor—in all these varied fields, incredible as it may seem, this versatile man attained some measure of achievement or distinction. For almost three decades he had made his home in the Pacific coast city where he died. His passing received due notice and worthy tribute in the press of western Canada.

Innes had an insatiable curiosity about everything—a spirit of inquiry and of enthusiasm. His sympathies were universal. He made friends easily and had many of them. Sensitive in every fibre of his being, there was rarely any display of that fatuous thing called "artistic temperament." He viewed life philosophically, and was usually vastly amused and greatly interested in the passing parade of men and events. Only during the last year or two of his life was he deeply disturbed by the chaotic conditions in the world. What he asked primarily was the means to do his work and a place in which to labor with a certain measure of freedom—

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modest requests, surely, for a gifted painter. "I hope some day I may grow into such a kindly man as he was," said the late James Butterfield, in his "Common Round" in the *Vancouver Province*, in an appreciation of Innes after his death.

In the field of Canadian art, it can be said at once, John Innes never strove to practice, nor followed, any so-called "new expression." He was not interested in new art forms as such, about which there has been a great deal of nebulous thinking and high-flown, academic talk. Like other sincere and gifted painters of Canada, he was content to portray the Canadian scene with fidelity and what skill he possessed. His fame as a painter will rest ultimately on the very considerable contribution he made in that way. It is as art historian of that vast land beyond the Great Lakes—the West he beheld and loved "before the wheat came and the Indian put on trousers and tucked his shirt in"—that will in years to come give him a place of importance among Canadian painters. John Innes did for the West, though in different style and more restrained color but with as much poetic feeling, what Tom Thomson did for Northern Ontario's landscape, and A. Y. Jackson, Clarence Gagnon and others have done for Quebec's picturesque and rugged grandeur.

John Innes's early years were full of fun and change and excitement. Spent in widely-separated places, these formative years were the finest sort of training for his later work.

Born in London, Ontario, he was the only son of the late Very Reverend Dean Innes, D.D., by his first wife, Elizabeth Anne, only daughter of Colonel John Clarke, 76th Regiment. His father—of whom Jack spoke always with great affection—was noted for his handsome face, his courtly manners, his

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preaching, and his wit. By all accounts he was a kindly soul, a greatly-loved clergyman, and a gentleman. In many respects his painter son was a worthy descendant.

Jack was educated at Hellmuth College, London; King's College, Sherbourne, England; and Dufferin Military Academy. Then came some early instruction in art. Of this period Innes later wrote: "As the years passed it became increasingly evident that unkind fate had palmed off an artist on my sorrowing family. . . Therefore it was determined to send me to college in the old country—no doubt in the hope that I might reform. In England I became rapidly worse. More prizes for design, and ever-increasing anathemas for everything else. I was allowed to study art. . . Some of the awful early Victorian atrocities I was forced to gaze upon over there haunt me still. But I did see lots of good stuff—the very best. Days upon days in many a gallery were a delight for life. I saw Leighton paint his 'Peace and War' panels in the Indian Museum. I worked with the most delightful of teachers; and the artists among my own people, of whom there were many, added kindly hints from experience gained in the continental schools at which they studied. Then the inevitable happened—I was sent home."

It was while in England the budding artist had a casual meeting with Benjamin Disraeli. He often told, with his characteristic chuckle, the story of this encounter. One day, in the India Office in London, the debonair young Canuck was searching for a particular department. On a stairway he met a dignified, elderly gentleman slowly and carefully descending, from whom he inquired its location. The elderly gentleman was at some pains to direct him aright, the young man

thanked him, and the two parted. An attendant who was near hastened to the youth and, with due deference to greatness, inquired if he realized the honor had just been his of having spoken to the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield. Innes laughed, and we fear with hardly due respect replied that he *didn't* know, and, moreover, he didn't "give a damn; he was a nice old gentleman and told me what I wanted to know." There was an amazed attendant. The reply was characteristic of the future painter's spirit and nonchalance.

After some time at the Military College, where his "wayward mind eschewed mathematics . . . and shied off on the paths of physiology," the family decided engineering was to be Jack's vocation, and the Imperial Service in India the scene of his activities. He studied under the late Colonel Tracy of Vancouver, then city engineer of London, Ontario. As the only examinations in which he was successful were in design, drafting and painting, plans were changed and he was allowed to study art.

Young Innes then decided to go west ahead of the Canadian Pacific Railway. "At this period," he recorded with a chuckle, "it began to dawn upon me that my proper occupation was that of slaying Indians and bears. So, with a couple of friends—who thought slaying Indians and bears would be nice—I joined a party going surveying in the far west." The party worked in the foothills of the Rockies, where the future artist made maps and sketches. The sketches, often done on bits of paper, attracted the attention and stirred the enthusiasm of those in charge of operations.

The survey finished, the young adventurer turned his

attention to ranching and horse wrangling. His breaking corral and stable were in the old town of Calgary, east of the Elbow river. When Calgary became more settled, he established a ranch near the mouth of High River. He sold horses to the government troops at the time of the Riel Rebellion in 1885, and had exciting moments with his neighbors, the Blackfeet, who, fortunately, refrained from scalping him.

During this ranching period Innes did occasional election cartoons for the Calgary *Herald*, for one of which the publisher, the late Judge Hugh Cayley, was jailed for contempt of court. Years later, in his Vancouver days, the solemn-witty judge laughingly swore there had been a grave miscarriage of justice—it was the artist who should have gone to jail.

The erstwhile rancher then moved to Banff, where, with Charles Halpin, he published for a brief time a paper called *Mountain Echoes*. He later joined the government staff engaged in developing Banff National Park. That job petered out suddenly when he told an official, who had made a suggestion young Innes did not consider to be in the public interest, just what he thought of him. Then followed Jack's first visit to the Pacific Coast.

At New Westminster, the late A. M. R. Gordon (McGregor Rose) and Innes launched a paper called *The Hornet*. Gordon was a particularly brilliant writer—he was the author of that well-known satire, "Meinself und Gott"; but as editors needed to eat occasionally, printers demanded wages regularly, and advertisers did not pay their bills promptly, *The Hornet*, in spite of brilliance, didn't buzz about for long.

It was during these formative years and diverse adventures

the future art historian feasted his eyes, stored his mind, and made sketches for use later of the great West land. The Canadian West, even then, had taken firm hold of his imagination.

In a light sketch of himself, written years ago, becoming serious for a moment, Innes said: "From this period of my life to the present day I have been a slave of the West. I have seen it grow from a terrifying wilderness to a land of golden wheat. I have watched the building of an empire stone upon stone. Its picturesque phases are startling, the color and significance wonderful. It is the theme of all my work whether in the east or here at home. Everywhere my brush has told, and I trust always will tell, the glories of the great wide land. In the cow camps, in the lodges of long-dead chiefs, in construction camps, on the mountain tops, or out upon the prairies criss-crossed with buffalo trails, I have learned the lore of Western Canada. That is why I have been called 'The Painter of the Canadian West.'"

And John Innes knew that early West with uncommon intimacy. He knew the plainsmen, ranchers, cattlemen, fur traders of the old breed, railroad builders, and other picturesque characters who later became well known in politics and business, most of whom deemed it no dishonour to be called his friend. And as a pioneer he knew, as few men have known, every aspect of the prairie and its moods: the sterile alkali patches, burnt grass in summer, the color-splash of the prairie rose, the pungent odor of sagebrush, glowing sunsets and far horizons, the poetry of summer skies, the twilight, the afterglow, the lure of Indian summer, the mysterious beauty of northern lights, the still cold of winter skies, the bite of blizzards, the buffalo and buffalo trails, made when all the



IN THE GRIP OF THE FROST
BY JOHN INNES

The Epic of Western Canada collection
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JOHN INNES: *Painter of the Canadian West*

West was home for those rugged herds of untamed wanderers. And with mountain passes, rocky defiles, rushing torrents and breath-taking alpine chasms he was equally familiar.

Returning to Toronto, the craving for further art study keen, Innes joined the staff of the *Mail and Empire* as cartoonist, illustrator and sketch writer. He studied with the late William Cruikshank, of whose caustic wit, eccentric ways and sturdy independence he later enjoyed telling. During this time he became an exhibitor in the Academy and the Ontario Society of Artists. He was concerned also at the time in the production of a small magazine called *Tarot*, a medium of expression for the wit and wisdom of kindred youthful spirits. When asked about this publication, Innes always smiled whimsically, leaving one to draw what conclusions he might about the magazine's importance.

Of those Toronto days many stories are told about the young artist's unconventional ways. For one thing, he disdained the life of fashion affected by young fellows, and it was not unusual for him to appear on King street in western garb. That demanded courage of a sort then, and probably would even today. To parade to church in striped trousers, frock coat and silk hat, the prevailing Sunday fashion, was a thing Innes refused to do. It is recorded—one hopes with truth—that on a particular Sunday, grotesquely attired, Innes and an artist friend—Jack Radford, I believe—lay in wait for an elegantly-attired acquaintance on his way to church. Each seized an arm of the protesting dandy and marched along with him, munching plums and cracking peanuts.

Another story, verified by both participants, told of the time a well-known Toronto painter invited Innes and Radford

to visit his studio, which was in the Arcade. These young artists believed they had been singled out for special attention. As they jauntily approached the Great One's door they heard the clatter of china. They stopped short, looked with alarm at each other as it dawned on them they had been invited to a studio tea, so they turned and fled as quietly as possible, only breathing freely when Yonge street was reached. Then they headed north to Scholes Hotel, where, had they wanted tea, probably they would first have been compelled to murder the bartender.

In 1899 Innes packed his duffle-bag and, with the late John P. McConnell as companion, again set out to see the West. They went to Calgary by rail, rode sixty-nine miles to the B. U. ranch for the fall roundup, then organized a pack-train with a couple of Indians and a half dozen horses to cross British Columbia. During six weeks of delightful autumn weather they worked their way through the Kootenay country, over mountain ranges to the Okanagan Valley, and thence to the coast by way of Merritt and the village of Aspen Grove. The trip ended for men and ponies on Hastings street in Vancouver, creating much curiosity and comment. McConnell wrote a series of articles about their experiences which were published in Eastern Canadian and Vancouver papers. He returned to Vancouver a few years later to establish *Saturday Sunset*, a weekly paper modelled after *Toronto Saturday Night*. Innes on this trip sketched and painted round-up scenes, Indians, mountains; and other things that took his fancy.

The Boer War breaking out at the end of the last century, the spirit of adventure ever keen in him, Innes volunteered and served in South Africa with the Second Canadian Mounted

Rifles, acting at the same time as correspondent and artist for the *Mail and Empire*. For his service he received a medal and three clasps. What is perhaps of greater value, he made scores of friends and had many interesting experiences he delighted in telling about later.

The young soldier's high spirits naturally were in evidence in South Africa. After his death an article, "John Innes: Comedian," written by a comrade in arms and published in a Vancouver suburban paper, *The Highland Echo*, tells a story that is perhaps worth repeating. Here it is:

. . . . A few years later we found ourselves together in a troop ship of mounted rifles bound for South Africa. Our boat landed us at Durban, where a train awaited to take us up country where we were required.

We had an endless wait in the train—one of those affairs of compartments, about eight of us in each compartment.

The platform was piled high with stores and provisions and the paraphernalia of a British army. One of the piles, and not the smallest, consisted of cases of Scotch whiskey. On this pile John Innes fixed his eye, and when the chance came he lifted one of the cases and transferred it to our car. Good fortune attending him, he returned for a second case, and before the guard had locked us in, he had filched a third.

The bottles were passed from one compartment to another, and pretty soon the desired effect had been secured. John was somewhere near the centre of the car, and his voice could be heard at both ends. To pass the time he suggested that we play the bagpipes, and he explained how it was done. At one end of the car we were to sustain the bass drone; at the other, led by himself, we were to do the air, or what in Scotland passes for an air.

The result gave such general satisfaction and approval that the concert lasted as long as the whiskey held out and for some time after that.

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On his return to Canada, Innes, in 1904, was elected a member of the Ontario Society of Artists. In 1907 he went to New York as staff artist in the Sunday newspaper field, where he made drawings for American and Canadian magazines and newspapers, did cartoons, book illustrations, and poster and commercial work. Also there he neglected no opportunity to round out his art education. New York was, naturally, of great interest and immense profit to him. The friends he made include the names of some American artists who in later years became notable. George Gray Barnard, the sculptor, was an intimate of the painter's in those New York days and, until he died, his friend.

Pleasant as life and profitable as study and work there could not fail to be, when one has a big idea and cherishes an ideal, fugitive drawings and commercial work can not be permanently satisfying.

And John Innes had a big idea. He had decided to paint a series of historical pictures of the Canadian West, from the days when the Indian, the fur-trader and the buffalo held undisputed sway in that vast lone land; through the years when prospectors and Red River carts trekked ever west and north and their number multiplied; until ribbons of steel made new trails across the prairies and wound sinuously along British Columbia's rivers and over its mountains; until the care-free, bow-legged cowboy came, settlements sprang up, towns grew in number and size, ripening wheat waved in golden glory on ever greater areas and a million cattle roamed the plains: at such time the Indians were put on reserves to dry-rot, the fur-trader and his breed wife edged off to live on the rim of civilization, and the buffalo were gathered into national

parks and public corrals to scratch their backs on fences for ease and exercise, their untrammelled freedom and nomadic activities curtailed forever.

The big idea, as it could not fail to do, finally drove the painter west again, in 1913. From that time until his death Vancouver was his home.

Enumerating his activities, Innes wrote: "As a painter I have shown in the Academy; been elected O. S. A.; painted cotton signs, houses, and occasionally towns. As an illustrator my best work was done in New York, although much has appeared in London and throughout Canada. I have been a surveyor, horse wrangler, printer, telephone lineman, editor, cartoonist, government official, fiction writer, and special correspondent. Also I have fought for the Empire, been on the stage, taught Sunday-school, been a choirmaster, tended bar, written a hymn, and once was arrested for murder. Heigh-o! It's a humdrum old world." All of which, no doubt, had in it degrees of truth. It was, at any rate, varied experience.

After two years' hard work, in the autumn of 1915, besides having accomplished much other work, Innes had ready sixteen canvases, and his first exhibition was arranged and took place in Hotel Vancouver. These pictures were all prairie and British Columbia scenes—"Chunks of the Western Epic," a writing friend called them. They were an earnest of what was later to be attempted.

This exhibition created much interest in the painter and his work, and comment in the press was generous and appreciative. Pollough Pogue, his writing-friend, in his colorful staccato style, said: "These pictures present to the public in serious art an era of Canadian history, and present it in a

picturesque and robust way. In Canada where there is so much good indigenous material for painters, pictures of pea-green fields and purple sunsets are in the highest social standing, and pictures in which the buffalo and the Indian are resuscitated are outside the hierarchy. . . Each painting is a piece of history and a piece of biography." The pictures in that show were painted from first-hand knowledge and with a fidelity to truth that required no sacrifice for effect.

Prairie, mountain and coast scenes, canvases dramatic and pictorial, made up that early exhibition. "Pea-green fields and purple sunsets" were not on the palette of John Innes, because they are not characteristically western; but "A Touch of Autumn" (brilliant yellows on the cottonwoods and frost on the burnt grass), "Winter Evening Over English Bay", "Nature's Highway", "The Trail-Finder", "Late Autumn, West Vancouver" (masterly rendering of the rich blue tints, mixture of smoke and haze, that give the North Shore mountains across Burrard Inlet such exquisite seasonal coloring) and other pastoral pieces were painted with poetic feeling and consummate skill. Two dramatic pictures reminiscent of Frederick Remington's work, "When The Blackfeet Hunt", and "Storm Driven", were full of action, stirring the imagination and quickening the pulse as few pictures have the power to do.

The thoughts of all in Canada in those years were centered on the First Great War. The spectres of hard times, tight money and fear stalked through the land. So the big idea had to be abandoned temporarily while the artist did cartoons, posters and commercial work to meet the exigencies of life.



THE CATTLE CRUISER
BY JOHN INNES

The Epic of Western Canada collection

Innes was greatly disappointed his application was not considered when the Canadian government was choosing artists to send to France to paint scenes immortalized by Canadian troops in the war. Probably no Canadian artist was better qualified by experience, temperament and training than he for that particular work. A drawing entitled "Flanders Mud," done for *The Gold Stripe*, a returned soldiers' periodical, is an excellent example of what might have been expected from this soldier-artist. He had a creditable military record and a flair for the type of work required, but John Innes was no politician!

Carlyle's niece and companion-secretary in his old age, Mary Aitken, once accompanied the dour philosopher and historian to John Everett Millais' sumptuous studio in Palace Gate, London, when Carlyle was sitting for the famous "hands unfinished" portrait that found its place in the National Portrait Gallery. When she saw the marble staircase, the fine pictures and statuary, and other evidences of wealth all about, this Scotch lass inquired: "And does a' this come oot o' a paint-pot?"—an inquiry quite worthy of Carlyle's own humour. In Millais' case it largely did "come oot o' a paint-pot." Painting was a lucrative business with him. Yet with all his genius and industry, if the great English painter had been fated to paint Canadian scenes, particularly Western Canadian scenes, for a Canadian public, would he have fared much better than most of our painters in material rewards for his work?

Like most artists, Innes would never have been an outstanding success as financier. Though he painted much and sold readily—the list of owners of his work is a lengthy and distinguished one—and though he had a life of movement,

thrills, ambition, high endeavor and endless work, he had little money sense and at the end there was privation and want.

The studios John Innes worked in, many in number, were never sumptuous, and were usually littered with an unholy and unsightly collection of junk—pack-saddles, riding boots, stirrups, blankets, books, magazines and miscellaneous debris. As friends left town—miners, prospectors, engineers; a nomadic crew in this western country—the long-suffering artist became custodian of their stuff. But always amid the litter there was reserved a free corner by north windows where sifted, shadowed, smoke-browed light struggled through to the painter's stand where his "chunks of the western epic" came to life. It was to such unpretentious, junk-littered, smoke-cured quarters a rare company of democratic spirits—poets, pilots, soldiers, ranchers, miners, prospectors, mounted police, artists, newspapermen—found their way to enjoy his talk and swap yarns. "Jack Innes's studio is an oasis in a business Sahara! I find a visit there as refreshing as a sea-breeze on a sweltering day!" a friend once remarked. This horde of visitors, however, did not further the painter's work, but he loved company and there was seldom any complaint at interruptions.

Generally in late afternoon, when painting light had gone, one frequently met there his old Toronto friend, John Radford, who dropped in to smoke and chat with Innes. Radford had settled in Vancouver shortly before Innes came to make his home in the coast city. For almost thirty years the bewhiskered, sharp-eyed Radford was a picturesque figure on that city's streets. He would disappear each summer for a month or two when he made an annual jaunt up the coast on a sketching trip. Then he would work industriously and in the spring



A TOUCH OF AUTUMN
BY JOHN INNES

The collection of the late P. Burns, Calgary



hold an exhibition of pictures. These were principally small, unimportant, moderately-priced sketches, with an occasional larger piece that had real merit, for Radford was not without inspiration. With a friendly newspaper connection, these shows had good publicity, the artist was a capable salesman, and many of his watercolours found their way into the homes of Vancouver citizens. At art shows, in the Gallery and elsewhere, one invariably saw—and always *heard*—John Radford. A solitary, shuffling, strident-voiced fellow, he would move from one picture to another, mumbling, approving or criticizing, heedless of who was about. If the picture was “modern”, a long, accusing finger shot out to express his opinion; he would shake his head sadly and bemoan the decadence of Canadian painting, for whose debasement he blamed primarily the Group of Seven. The Group and all its works were anathema to Radford. When discussing this subject of modern art he had no compunction: his hard blue eyes blazed, his whiskered jaw was thrust out, his deep voice rose, and invective flowed hot and definite in condemnation of “Mountains that look like ice-cream cones!” . . . “Drawing that would shame a school-boy!” . . . “Just atrocious design that they call art!” and so forth. He often launched a diatribe, stopped suddenly, spluttered “It makes me sick!” and shuffled angrily from the room. John was a positive individual! For some time he had charge of an art column on a Vancouver daily newspaper. When he was allowed free rein, his reviews and criticisms were often harsh and biting. After stubbornly fighting old age and bad health for two or three years, John Radford died in May, 1940, a few months before his friend John Innes passed.

Though they had genuine regard for each other, Innes and

Radford differed sharply and argued heatedly about many things. On one point, however, they seemed always to be in agreement: that the influence of the Group of Seven on Canadian art in the main had been far from wholesome. Characteristically, the views of Innes on this controversial subject were much more liberal than those of his more positive friend. Innes laughed where Radford fumed. There is now little doubt that hostile criticism of the Group's early work bred in its members a spirit of defiance, controversy stirred revolt, and revolt encouraged excess. Yet the work that brought forth the first violent outbursts against it, viewed calmly today, is sane and restrained when compared with what less talented and slavish imitators and followers of the Group have since perpetrated. That at least one of the original members of the Group, J. E. H. MacDonald, whose work had been most violently attacked, was not in sympathy with later trends, is indicated by Albert H. Robson in his *Canadian Artists' Series* volume on that artist. Said Robson: "Some of the exhibitors moved towards mild forms of abstract painting, and MacDonald was out of step with the later policies . . . feeling that there was a definite slipping backwards in standards. . . . He had little sympathy with abstractions or any of the 'isms' of modern art, and definitely believed that an artist was an interpreter of the beauty of nature as seen through the eyes of an individual personality." That was a philosophy of art also held by John Innes, who believed that much that is called "modern" painting is wholly insincere.

Another interesting character, who shared a studio with Innes for a considerable time and influenced his method of painting, was George H. Southwell. Urbane, soft-voiced,

rotund, bald, whiskered, many years ago Southwell gave up business in England and brought his young family to Canada, a country then less tradition-bound, to make his living as builder, portrait painter, and art teacher. As a teacher he had exceptional gifts. Two of his pupils who have achieved distinction are his daughter Nora, also a portrait painter, whose later work has been done principally in California and Eastern Canada; and John Ford Clymer, whose name is now well known as painter, magazine illustrator and cover designer.

John Clymer, then a boy in his 'teens, one day brought some of his sketches for criticism to the studio occupied by Innes and Southwell. The work was undoubtedly crude. Innes shook his head despairingly over the young artist's possibilities. Southwell, with a more discerning eye and a teacher's intuition, saw in it inherent strength and marked individuality. He advised young Clymer to attend an art school. For some months this course was followed, until one day the head of the painting department—a name well known in Canadian art affairs—told the young student he was just wasting his time attempting to become an artist. On the verge of tears, this was reported by Clymer to Southwell, whose advice then was to leave the school and come to him as a pupil. Fortunately that was what Clymer did. He shared a studio with his teacher, working part time designing and painting outdoor signs for a livelihood. Under kindly and discerning tuition amazing progress was made, the keen, talented boy unfolding like a rose in a June sun. He was apt, enthusiastic, industrious. Soon Southwell's verdict was, "I can't teach you anything more." Before long Clymer had commissions, was selling magazine covers, and illustrating stories for Canadian maga-

zines. He was tireless and a speedy worker, often painting directly on his canvas without sketching and without models. About this time he painted a portrait of the picturesque, unkempt Radford in the record time of fifty minutes, which painting was later sold as a magazine cover. In an amazingly short time Clymer had a splendid and widening connection. Then he moved to Toronto to be closer to his market. Soon he was in New York. His later success was predicted by his former teacher.

But to return to the subject of this story.

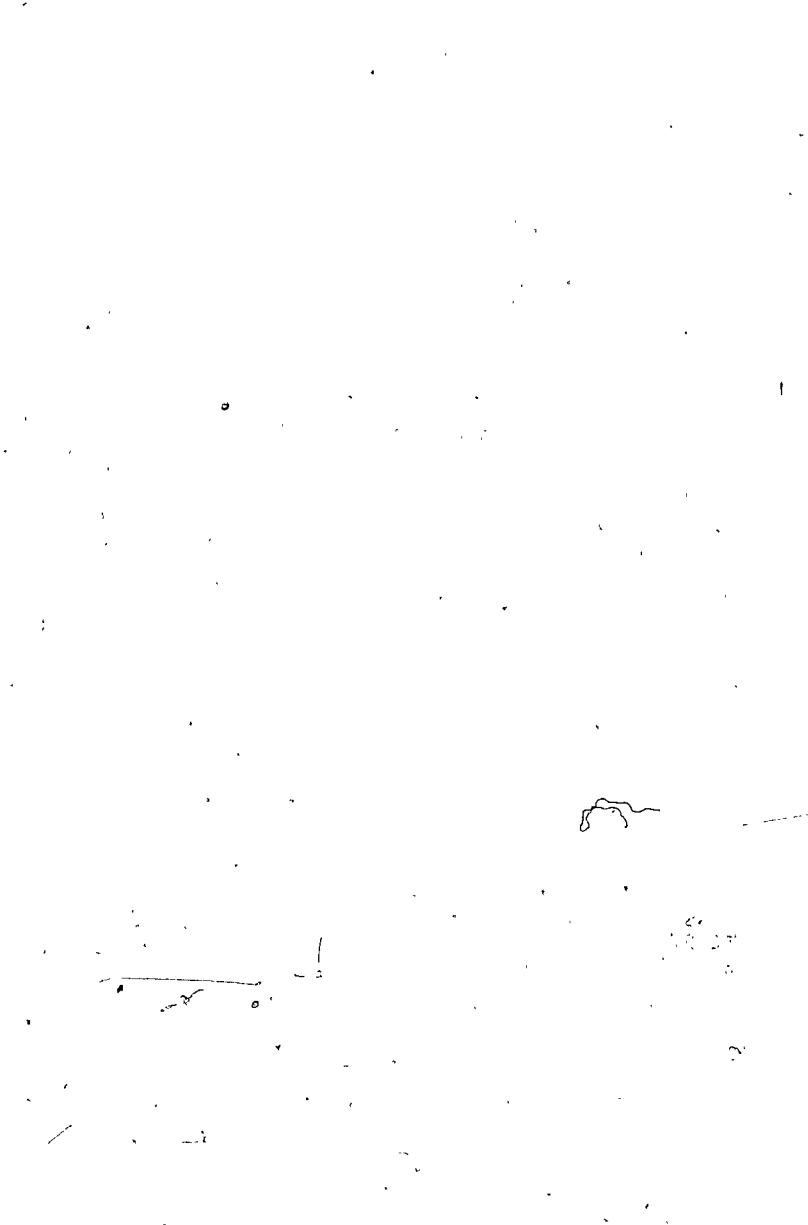
In September, 1919, Innes exhibited for the first time at the annual exhibition of the B. C. Society of Fine Arts, showing two notable canvases, "In the Grip of the Frost" and "The Cattle Cruiser." In the first picture, one of the finest and most poetic of the artist's western scenes, a biting north wind cuts across the trail traversed by a party of mounted Indians; the thermometer hovers around fifty below zero; it is late afternoon—the sun hits the topmost peaks with a cold light; a sun-dog dances in the valley; and the stripling cottonwoods, to which still cling a few colored leaves, are bent by the force of the wind. Though keyed on pure white, the Indians' red blankets provide the high color note to make this picture arresting. "The Cattle Cruiser" shows the North Thompson country in British Columbia's dry belt. In clarity of atmosphere this picture is like a prairie scene, but the bald, mineral-streaked rock, the swift river, the sagebrush, an Interior cattleman on a cayuse searching along the bank for "strays", all indicate a different country and require decidedly different atmospheric treatment.

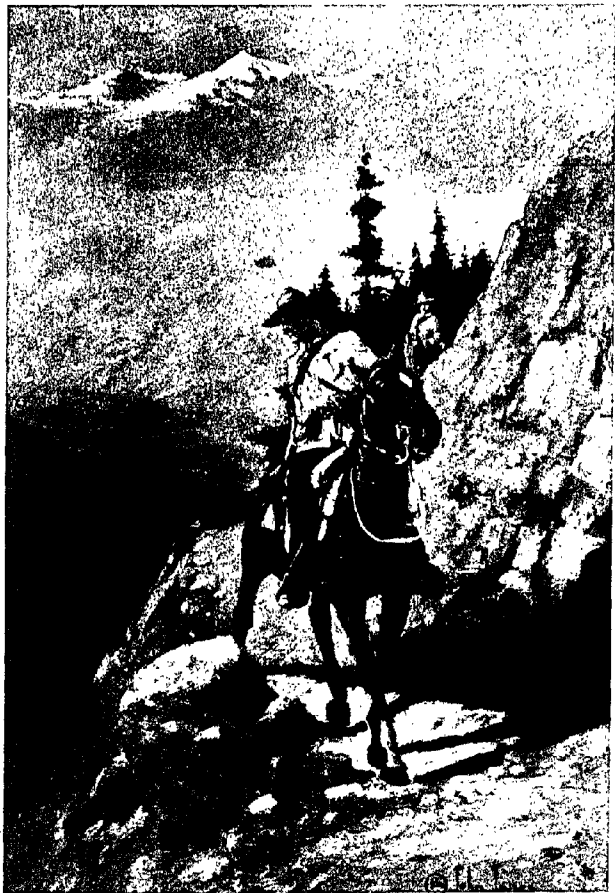
The next fifteen years were eventful ones for Innes. In



WHEN THE BLACKFEET HUNT
BY JOHN INNES

The Epic of Western Canada collection





SCARLET AND GOLD
BY JOHN INNES

The Epic of Western Canada collection



JOHN INNES: *Painter of the Canadian West*

this period was done his finest work, and under most favorable circumstances.

Commissioned by the Native Sons of British Columbia, Post No. 2, Vancouver, he painted eight large canvases which depict the highlights of the province's romantic history. These pictures are heroic in conception—of great events and “men with empires in their bosoms”—and they were painted in the maturity of the artist's power. They now hang in the University of British Columbia Library, a fitting abode.

Commissioned by the *Vancouver Sun*, Innes next painted “President Harding in Canada,” which commemorates the occasion in July, 1923, when for the first time a President of the United States visited Canada during his term of office. Appropriately staged in the glory of Vancouver's Stanley Park on a perfect summer day, the scene, followed so closely by the President's death, stirred the painter's emotions. To those who know them, in the vast audience assembled on that occasion, are authentic portraits of many of the artist's friends. This picture now hangs in the Press Gallery at Washington, D. C. It is not characteristically Innes work.

Innes was never happy nor inspired when he painted to order on commission.

About this time a painting of the first meeting after incorporation of Vancouver City Council was commissioned. The artist went to infinite pains to secure accurate details for this picture of a local historical event, but, as usual in such circumstances, the work frankly bored him. Useful though they may be, even decorative, perhaps nothing could be less inspiring for a painting than a group of aldermen. That was not Innes's best picture!

JOHN INNES: *Painter of the Canadian West*

Painting ten large decorative wall panels for a new wing of the David Spencer department store was the next contract. The work, illustrating romance, commerce and industry in British Columbia, demanded great imaginative effort as well as much physical outlay. Buckets of paint were required for the job. To complete the work in the limited time permitted, Innes had the collaboration and able assistance of George Southwell. These panels are more than a favorable contrast to the decorations in the rotunda of the new Hotel Vancouver, particularly that of the wooden figure, grotesquely garbed, altogether a jarring color note, of an alleged Captain George Vancouver.

Then, it seemed providentially, an event occurred that shaped the destiny of John Innes for the next decade. He suddenly realized the dream of most artists: he found a patron. Through an introduction by the writer of this story, Innes met Arthur P. Denby. Denby had seen some of the artist's work and liked it. On further acquaintance with the artist and his painting, he became enthusiastic. Then with his assistance and encouragement the two Epic series of Western Canadian canvases were produced. Through the combined efforts of these two men the thirty pictures that comprise the remarkable Epic of Western Canada collection were painted by Innes or secured by repurchase of his existing works. Later followed the Epic of Transportation series, entirely new work by the painter. Unfortunately misunderstandings and disagreements arose, for which neither artist nor patron was wholly to blame, and an alliance that had accomplished much good was ended. The truth is, Innes had driven himself for some years beyond his strength and was worn out. Denby,

eager to see these prodigious feats of creative work completed in the artist's years of vigor, had perhaps urged too great effort.

The Epic of Western Canada, the work of one man, comprising as it did thirty pictures, was in itself a monumental task. It is a pictorial history of the Canadian West that could not be duplicated, because no painter but John Innes had the first-hand knowledge to produce it. The collection was exhibited in the galleries of the Hudson's Bay Company in Vancouver, where it created extraordinary interest, and, with commendable judgment, was subsequently purchased in its entirety by that company. These pictures were later shown in Winnipeg, in London, England, and at the Fur Congress some years later in Leipzig, Germany. They are now back in Winnipeg.

The Epic of Transportation, a collection of twenty-one large canvases—which Innes titled "From Trail to Rail"—was "a story of man's achievement in pushing back the frontiers of Canada," and was dedicated by the artist to "the fraternity of the unafraid; the Trail-blazers and Builders of this Dominion who made the way straight in the wilderness for those who were to follow. . . . That which they conquered, we have inherited." These pictures carry one from the vagrant trails of wild creatures and the early dog travois, through the various modes of transportation successively used, to the solid and purposeful rails of a world trade-route. The series is complete, and in every sense epic.

Earlier in his career, when in New York, Innes did a less ambitious series of western modes of transportation. These pictures were purchased and reproduced by a Philadelphia

publisher as colored pictorial postcards. It was reported to have been a most successful commercial venture, millions of copies of the cards being sold.

Another memorable picture of that intense creative period when the two Epic series were produced—in the opinion of some the artist's *magnum opus*—was called "June 24th, 1789." The Spanish Commander, Don Martinez, is here shown laying claim in the name of Carolus III, King of Spain, to the territory now known as the West Coast of Vancouver Island. The painter caught the dramatic significance of this little-known but vastly-important event. In any work of this nature, Innes could be depended upon to stage his scene beautifully and costume his characters, as far as humanly possible, accurately.

After the intense creative effort of the Epic pictures, Innes had a break-down in health. For several years before his death he was confined to his home for weeks at a stretch. When a young man he had been threatened with tuberculosis. He recovered, but was susceptible from that time to bronchial weakness. During these later years he had no downtown studio.

At home he was not idle. He painted regularly, did some commercial work when it offered, wrote poetry, read a great deal, and worked at his inventions. And through these years of indifferent health, harrassed by want, and in uncongenial surroundings, he kept a mind comparatively serene. Rebellion seemed quelled in him.

In summer days he ventured forth occasionally to visit among old friends or attend to some business affair. On these excursions he would usually call first at my office, peer in the window with a smile before entering, then come in with a



THE RED RIVER CART
BY JOHN INNES

100

100

cheery greeting and a chuckle. He would chat for a time, fill his pipe, then be on his way. It was always a delight to see him. Once, in the autumn of 1940, I accompanied him to the office of the American consul, where he had to make an affidavit concerning the authenticity of one of his pictures that had been purchased by a lady in San Francisco, a requirement before its entry would be permitted to the United States. To the clerk making out the forms he laughingly said: "J. B. here tells me it's necessary to swear I am the perpetrator of the bloody mess!"

This picture, greatly prized by the purchaser, was called "Voice of Night." Painted when the artist was seventy-five years of age, it will remain one of his most poetic and striking pieces. A night scene it was, in deep blues, mountains faintly discernible in the background, in the foreground a lone male figure in a canoe, a dripping paddle laid across the gunwale while he gazes in awe and wonder at the starry immensity above.

A short time before he passed on Innes painted several small pictures of favorite western subjects, each a fine composition, with clean line and bold color. His imagination was still alert and keen, his hand steady, and his color sense undimmed and unimpaired.

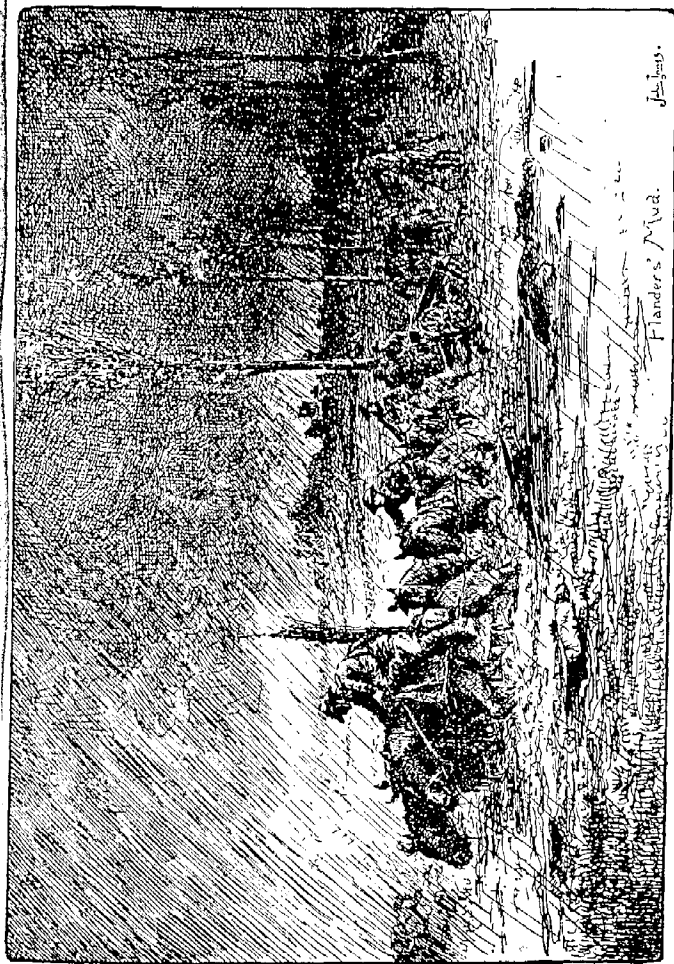
In appearance John Innes was a distinguished figure—tall, erect, handsome. He had a leonine head and fine brow. He generally wore a well-trimmed beard. Towards the end his figure grew slighter and his beard became suddenly quite grey. In early photographs, and in his last years, he resembled Kaiser Wilhelm of unpleasant memory. That charge, directed

at him banteringly, he dismissed with a hearty laugh and an expressive "Bah!"

"Kindly-cynical" was the term used by James Butterfield to designate Innes as a critic. There was, however, much more of kindness than cynicism in his approach. On occasions he listened with amazing patience, kindness and great fortitude while I read to him play scripts. Before the deluge he would fill his pipe, get comfortably settled, say "go ahead!"—then bear the ordeal like a Stoic. He always followed the text keenly, occasionally interrupting to ask that a line be read again or a situation explained, to make a short comment, to enjoy a laugh, or to grunt disapproval of some thought or character. When the reading had finished he would be thoughtfully silent for a time, then proceed to discuss the play as a whole with kindly judgment and fine discrimination. His sense of values was intuitive, his memory extraordinary, his advice invaluable.

Innes never seriously pursued poetry as an art. He wrote verse when the spirit moved him or to express a mood. He enjoyed greatly writing western vernacular rhyme, the best example of that type being "The Tragedy of the Sway-backed Pinto", which he illustrated in color and which was published in 1920. The foreword to the little volume was a masterpiece of literary kidding. Poems patriotic and of deep spiritual feeling welled out of him at intervals. Some day, perhaps, this fugitive verse will be collected and published.

As a cartoonist John Innes may not have been in the front rank. His work showed a keen sense of humour, the drawing was masterly, and he made his point definitely, but his car-



FLANDERS MUD

PEN AND INK DRAWING BY JOHN INNES

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toons had too much depth of idea to have universal appeal. He usually laughed with, not at, the object of his satire.

As an illustrator, being of a sympathetic mind, and having wide knowledge, he was a master craftsman. The work he did in that line in New York was of a high order. There he was entrusted with the illustrations for many important books. He was especially fond of doing things for children's books. "I like doing things for kids," he once remarked to me; "it makes one feel so clean inside." That was the mind and heart of John Innes.

Some of Innes's posters were known all across Canada. The Scotsman used for advertising Tillson's Pan-dried Oats years ago, drawn by Innes, was perhaps as well known as any figure ever employed in a Canadian national campaign. His posters for the 1919 Victory Loan, used only in British Columbia, were, many thought, the best designed at that time.

As raconteur Innes was a delight. He had a natural, easy style, a chuckle of enjoyment when telling his story, and one waited for the denouement with keen anticipation.

Of his inventions, to which a great deal of time was devoted in his later years, it is too soon to speak. That so accomplished a painter should divert his energies to things so speculative seemed a waste of effort. It may be Innes felt he had exhausted vital themes for pictures and his restless, inquiring mind must explore new fields. His endeavor always was to apply natural laws to scientific ends. He worked feverishly in his last years to perfect a device he hoped would serve the democratic nations in their momentous struggle for existence against totalitarian aggression. To the last he felt certain his invention was perfected.

Early in 1941 John had an attack of influenza. He was confident he had beaten the enemy and laughed at any suggestion he required medical treatment or hospital attention. Proper nourishment was all that was needed to set him on his feet again, so he said. The evening of a visit at that time, he had been reading a volume by Sir Oliver Lodge—I am not certain of the title—and was enthusiastic about that scientist's fine spirit and philosophy. He read aloud to me several passages that he thought most striking.

A few days later pneumonia developed, then he had a slight stroke. A doctor was called to attend him, but he still refused to go to hospital. He was extremely drowsy and breathed with great difficulty when I visited him. As I sat at his bedside, he apologized for seeming rudeness and inattention. I suggested that he lie quietly and not bother to talk. Looking about the room at some pictures he had done shortly before, I remained silent. Presently he turned, gazed questioningly at me for a time, then inquired: "What are you thinking about, Jack?" With a grin I replied: "My sins." A twinkle came into his fine eyes, then with a throaty chuckle he said: "My boy, there you have a vast field to explore!"

Two days later he went to hospital, but doctors and oxygen tents were by this time of no avail.

He sleeps now at the foot of the mountains across Burrard Inlet—the mountains he loved so intensely and painted so gloriously. In a poem closing an appreciation of an old friend, Blanche Holt Murison wrote of his passing in an article "Innes of Canada":

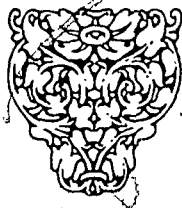
JOHN INNES: *Painter of the Canadian West*

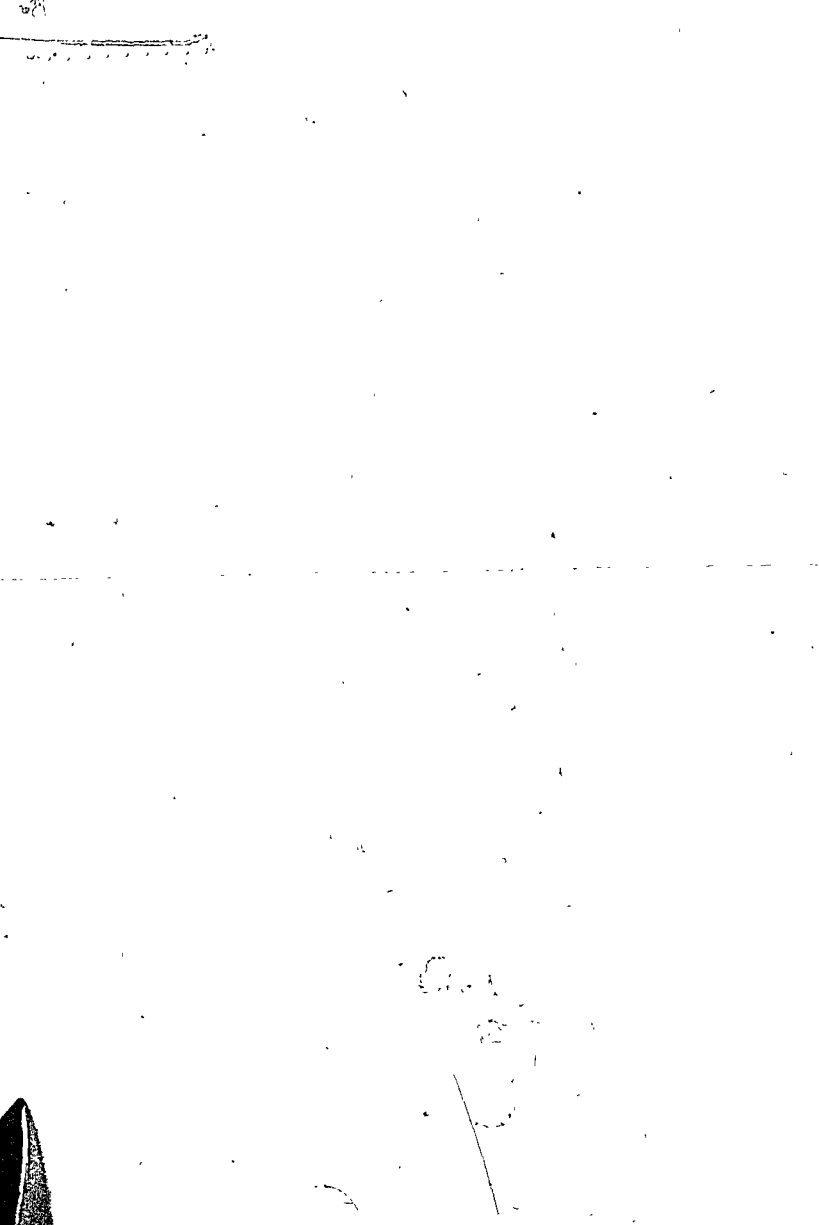
*Over the Lions' Gate the dawn looked down
And with soft fingers tenderly outspread
A lovely light that reached above the town
And touched the pillow underneath his head.*

*Over the hills of night the morning came,
Came with the kindly gesture of a friend;
Another trail—the flicker of a flame
Over the hills he loved—then—Journey's End.*

In recognition that will some day come for the work of sincere outstanding Canadian painters, when culture has a voice as insistent as money, John Innes's pictures of the Canadian West will occupy their proper place and be as greatly prized for their truth, beauty and historical value as the painter was loved by those who knew him for his wit, genius and humanity.

He was a distinguished Canadian.





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